

**Testimony of
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Office of Water
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
before the
Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
April 28, 2010**

1. Introduction

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am Nancy Stoner, Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Office of Water at the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Thank you for the opportunity to discuss two large aquatic ecosystems – the Columbia River Basin and the San Francisco Bay – and the EPA programs that work to protect and restore them.

We've long known that large aquatic ecosystems are among the most ecologically valuable and productive habitats on earth. These ecosystems foster a wonderful abundance and diversity of wildlife like shore birds, fish, crabs, marine mammals, shellfish, and sea birds. Our estuaries and rivers function as the feeding, spawning, and nursery grounds for many marine and terrestrial finfish, shellfish, birds, and plants, supporting unique communities of plants and animals that are specially adapted for life in these ecosystems.

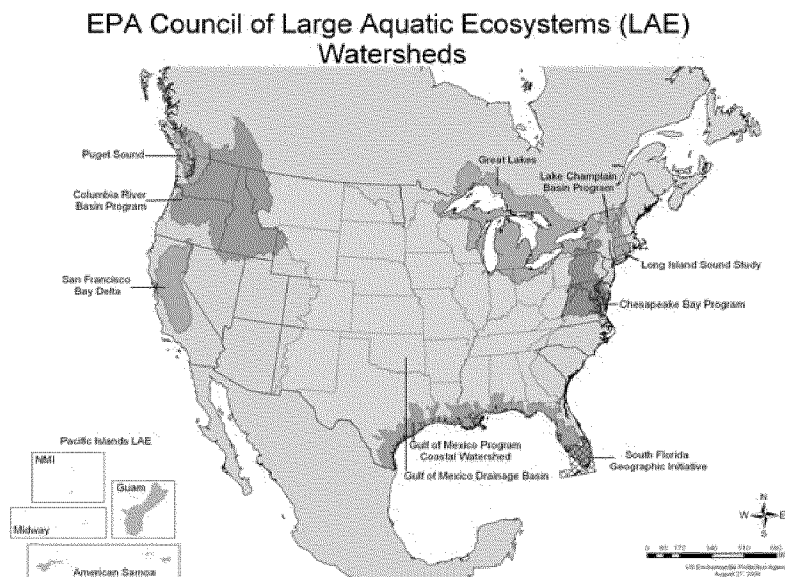
These areas are also dynamic economic engines for many activities vital to the Nation, including sport and commercial fisheries, agriculture, transportation, recreation, and electrical power generation. However, many of these same activities have disrupted natural processes and impaired water quality in some areas to the point where human health is at risk and ecosystems and the plants and animals that depend on them are threatened. Recent studies and monitoring programs have found a number of troubling problems, including significant levels of toxic chemicals in fish and the waters they inhabit such as DDT, PCBs, mercury, PBDEs and other endocrine disrupting flame retardants, as well as nutrient over-enrichment that leads to hypoxic or low oxygen conditions and subsequent loss of marine life.

EPA's current programs for these large aquatic ecosystems (LAEs) play a substantial role in addressing these and other environmental problems. For example, the Columbia River Basin LAE convened a collaborative watershed group that assessed the ecosystem as a whole and, in 2009, produced the Columbia River Basin *State of the River Report for Toxics* that identified priority problems, monitoring gaps, and toxic reduction lessons learned. The San Francisco Bay LAE increased the effectiveness of EPA's regulatory programs to protect wetlands and improve water quality through strategic targeting of resources and continued support for wetlands restoration, TMDL development, stormwater permitting, and State/Federal partnerships to address Delta resource concerns. However, serious environmental challenges remain.

II. Overview of EPA's Large Aquatic Ecosystem Programs¹

Improved protection of the Nation's large aquatic ecosystems has long been a theme of several major reports and studies. For example, the National Research Council recommended in 1992 that "a large-scale aquatic ecosystem restoration program...should be implemented to regain and protect the physical, chemical and biological integrity of surface water." In 2007, the National Academy of Public Administration published a report recommending "making large scale ecosystem restoration a national priority." EPA's *Strategic Plan: 2006 – 2011*, provides for a significantly expanded effort to protect large aquatic ecosystems as a complement to the implementation of core, national water quality programs.

EPA has established LAE programs for 10 areas: Chesapeake Bay, Columbia River, Great Lakes, Gulf of Mexico, Lake Champlain, Long Island Sound, Pacific Islands, Puget Sound–Georgia Basin, South Florida Ecosystem, and San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary. These LAE programs are a unique partnership of EPA and numerous federal, state, and local organizations working together to address large-scale watershed management challenges. The EPA convenes the LAE Programs and provides leadership and other support to help them address some of the Nation's most complex water resource management challenges, such as nutrient overloading, stormwater flow and toxic sediments. EPA's *Strategic Plan* describes environmental goals and measures of progress for each large aquatic ecosystem.² EPA's Office of Water has also established a national *Council of Large Aquatic Ecosystems* made up of senior managers. Key goals of the Council are to encourage the exchange of best management practices, improve coordination between large aquatic ecosystem programs and core national water programs, strengthen links between ecosystem programs and the EPA Strategic Plan and budget, and focus EPA research on the top priority needs of these ecosystem programs.



¹ More information on Large Aquatic Ecosystem Programs is available at epa.gov/owow/oceans/partnerships/large_aquatic.html.

² For more information, see epa.gov/ocfo/plan/2006/goal_4.pdf.

III. Overview of Columbia River Basin and San Francisco Bay: Challenges, Priorities, and Legislation

Columbia River Basin Challenges and Priorities

The Columbia River Basin program (CRBP) covers a major portion of North America including parts of seven U.S. States and British Columbia. The basin provides drainage through an area of more than 260,000 square miles into a river near 1,200 miles in length. The Columbia River Basin provides an important North American backdrop for urban settlement and development, agriculture, transportation, recreation, fisheries and hydropower. The Columbia River Basin's unique ecosystem is home to many important plants and animals. Columbia River salmon and steelhead runs were once the largest runs in the world, but are now threatened and endangered in large part due to habitat and water issues including toxics. The tribal people of the Columbia River have depended on these salmon for thousands of years for human, spiritual, and cultural sustenance. Salmon restoration together with toxics reduction in the Columbia River Basin is a key environmental justice issue for EPA.

The goal of the CRBP is to protect public health and the environment by reducing toxics in fish, water, and sediment of the Columbia River Basin; increase the actions taken to reduce toxics; and implement a collaborative monitoring and research strategy to understand toxic loads, emerging contaminants, and overall ecosystem health. This program is a collaboration among EPA, the states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana, Columbia Basin tribal governments, the Lower Columbia River Estuary Partnership, local governments, citizen groups, industry, and other federal agencies.

While the actions described above have resulted in some progress, much work remains. The CRBP has identified the following priorities that need urgent attention:

- more protective water quality standards to protect tribal members and others who eat a large amount of fish from the Columbia River;
- long term monitoring for the Columbia River Basin with an emphasis on emerging contaminants, including endocrine disrupting flame retardants (e.g., PBDEs) and pharmaceuticals;
- integration of Columbia River Basin salmon recovery efforts with toxics reduction;
- enhanced agricultural partnerships to reduce sediment and pesticide loadings as well as more assistance to farmers in eco-certification; and
- increased application of EPA's *Green Chemistry* and *Design for the Environment* program concepts within the Basin.

Columbia River Basin Legislation

Congressman Blumenauer's bill (H.R. 4652) would require the Administrator to appoint a team leader in EPA's Region 10 who would coordinate support for the development and implementation of projects to protect and restore the Columbia River Basin. The bill would authorize appropriations of \$40,000,000 for each of the fiscal years 2011 – 2015. This proposed legislation is consistent with EPA's commitment to the Columbia River Basin and our

programmatic goals for the Basin as identified by the Columbia River Basin Program.

San Francisco Bay Challenges and Priorities

The San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary is the largest estuary on the West Coast of North America. Its 4-million acre watershed covers more than 40% of California and includes the drainage basins for the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and the San Francisco Bay. San Francisco Bay is the defining natural feature that makes the Bay Area a unique and beautiful place to live. Of national renown, the Bay is valuable not only for its aesthetic qualities, but also for the critical habitat it provides for native and migrating fish and waterfowl, its moderating effect on the local climate, the recreational opportunities it affords, and the tourist, trade and fishery economies it supports. While my comments today primarily address San Francisco Bay, I want to acknowledge that EPA is also working to address challenges throughout the larger Bay-Delta Estuary, including degraded water quality, sharp declines in fisheries, and competing water needs. I want to assure you that EPA is committed to providing leadership in a reinvigorated State/Federal partnership to balance agriculture, urban, and environmental water needs.

San Francisco Bay is confronted by a wide range of challenges to sustain its many valuable functions into the future. Rapid and unplanned urban development is resulting in greater pollutant loadings to the Bay; legacy pollution (pesticides, PCBs, and mercury) and new emerging contaminants limit the ability of the Bay to support a thriving food web; 95% of the Bay's historic wetland habitat has been lost; and an aging (and often unseen) infrastructure can release sewage and other pollutants into the Bay and its tributaries.

To address these challenges EPA is working on a broad range of activities that include:

- strengthening implementation of the San Francisco Estuary Partnership's Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) by supporting its new strategic plan;
- reducing urban runoff impacts on water quality through more effective stormwater permitting and enforcement;
- creating incentives to utilize low impact development techniques ;
- implementing a competitive grant program to improve water quality and restore the San Francisco Bay watershed;
- increasing the effectiveness of regulatory programs to protect wetlands and streams, while continuing to support restoration of wetlands acreage;
- supporting the California Water Boards in implementing their plans to review and improve water quality standards; and
- supporting studies that prepare for the effects of climate change.

While the measures described above have resulted in some progress, the health of the Bay is at a crossroads. For example, much of the Bay Area's wastewater infrastructure was built several decades ago and needs repairs or replacement. In 2008 alone, the Bay was subject to more than 2,000 raw sewage spills. EPA's priority is to build on the strong collaboration among Bay Area business, civic and environmental leaders to make significant progress in restoring and protecting this world class resource.

San Francisco Bay Legislation

Congresswoman Jackie Speier's bill (H.R. 5061) would establish in EPA Region 9 a San Francisco Bay Program Office that would coordinate the implementation of efforts to restore San Francisco Bay and authorize approximately \$100 million annually over 10 years to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to fund efforts to restore San Francisco Bay. This proposed legislation is consistent with EPA's commitment to San Francisco Bay and implementing the San Francisco Estuary Partnership's CCMP.

IV. Relationship to EPA's National Estuary Program (NEP)

The National Estuary Program was established by section 320 of the Clean Water Act Amendments of 1987, with a mission to protect and restore nationally-significant estuaries. The NEP currently includes 28 programs, located along the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Pacific coasts. EPA is fortunate to have excellent, long-standing collaborative relationships with both the Lower Columbia River Estuary Partnership and the San Francisco Estuary Partnership. Efforts to expand needed support for these significant large aquatic ecosystems should be carefully reviewed to ensure that they effectively build upon existing efforts.

V. Conclusion

EPA is committed to protecting America's waters. The Columbia River Basin and San Francisco Bay programs discussed in this testimony are a critical part of EPA's Clean Water Act strategy. They are effective, efficient, and collaborative. And they have demonstrated the value of partnering to achieve environmental results. However, while some progress has been made, much work remains to be done. The legislation is consistent with EPA's commitment to protect and restore the San Francisco Bay and Columbia River Basin. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.